

Op-ed on Invasive Species Legislation

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By Congressman Vernon J. Ehlers

For many years, governments and citizens in Michigan and throughout the Great Lakes Basin have been battling a notorious invader – the zebra mussel. These small mollusks invaded the Great Lakes in the 1980s, quickly multiplied and spread across the region, clogging water intake pipes and creating problems for boaters who have to spend time and money cleaning hulls. Last summer, a voracious fish known as the Northern snakehead became a media celebrity and a serious threat to Maryland waterways. This predator wipes out native fish and once it is done feeding in one pond, it literally gets up and crawls across land to the next one. These are only two examples of “invasive species” – animals and plants that are introduced, take hold and multiply in ecosystems where they don’t have any competition, causing tremendous economic and environmental harm.

If you polled Americans as to what the most pressing economic and environmental issues are, dealing with invasive species probably wouldn’t make the list. But considering the economic and environmental threats they pose to our nation, attention must be paid to invasive species. For example, recent studies have estimated that zebra mussels have cost governments and utilities in the Great Lakes region more than \$1 billion since the late 1980s. On an environmental level, invasive species are now recognized as the No. 2 threat to endangered species, as they often compete for food and destroy the habitat of other native plants and animals.

Congress must act to combat this threat. That’s why I, along with Senator Carl Levin and others, have sponsored a comprehensive legislative package (H.R. 1080 & 1081 and S. 525) to do just that. One central theme drives our effort – “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” If we spend millions preventing aquatic invasive species from entering our waters, we will avoid spending billions trying to control and manage them once they are here. Our legislation does three overarching things fitting with this theme.

First, this legislation takes major strides forward in managing the shipping industry, which is responsible for (unintentionally) bringing most of the aquatic invasive species into our waters through ships’ ballast tanks. The legislation contains provisions that require shippers to ensure they are using best management practices, and, most importantly, treat ballast water so that species are killed before ballast water is dumped into our waterways. This is the most effective way to prevent the next zebra mussel from entering our waterways and wreaking economic and environmental havoc.

Second, we will, for the first time, establish a screening program to look at the intentional introduction of new plants and animals into the United States. People have been bringing new species into America since before our nation was created. The rate of these introductions has increased dramatically over the past 50 years because of global trade

and efficient and fast transportation systems. Under current law, take no action until we know that a species is harmful, which is too late. This legislation changes that burden by allowing federal agencies to screen for potential “bad actors” and prevent the next snakehead fish from being imported into the United States.

Finally, we establish a comprehensive research program, which was sorely lacking in previous legislative efforts to deal with invasive species. I’m taking the lead on this part of the legislative effort, because when I looked at the underlying law it became clear that research was simply an afterthought. This explains why so much of the invasive species management program has been stalled for years. Good science must underpin management decisions if these decisions are going to be considered credible to the outside world.

It is time to change our strategy in dealing with aquatic invasive species. It is time for Congress to realize that this threat continues to grow and will not go away unless we act. It is time for Congress to move this legislation forward. Invasive species don’t recognize or respect political boundaries or timelines and they are arriving here even as you read this today.